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ABSTRACT

Using data from a large project on child abuse and neglect as predictors of violent criminal behavior, researchers investigated the connection between childhood maltreatment and later arrest for alcohol and drug-related offenses. After controlling for age, gender, and race, child maltreatment was found to be a significant predictor of delinquency. However, the relationship between childhood victimization and juvenile arrests for alcohol or drugs was not significant. Only one variable--gender--influenced the juvenile arrest rate for alcohol or drugs. Males were more than 10 times as likely to be arrested for these offenses as females prior to age 18. After controlling for demographic characteristics and juvenile contact with the criminal justice system, childhood abuse or neglect was found to be a statistically significant predictor of having at least one alcohol- or drug-related arrest in adulthood. An indirect path between childhood victimization and adult substance abuse arrest was also demonstrated. Abused or neglected females were more likely to have alcohol or drug arrests as adults, but no differences were found for male victims and controls. Being abused or neglected increased the probability of arrest for alcohol or drugs in adulthood for whites, but not for blacks. More research is needed for further analysis of the relationship between childhood maltreatment and later arrest for substance abuse, but intervention efforts should recognize possible increased risks. (SLD)

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National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

November 1995

Childhood Victimization and Risk for Alcohol and Drug Arrests

While the immediate consequences of childhood abuse or neglect on its victims may involve physical or psychological trauma, the residual effects—emotional and developmental scars—often presage problem behaviors in adolescence and adulthood. Research has shown that abused or neglected children are likely candidates for delinquency and adult criminality, in general, but the relationship of maltreatment to subsequent drug or alcohol misuse, specifically, is less clear.

Using data from a large project (sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, Indiana University Biomedical Research Committee, and Harvard University's Talley Foundation) on child abuse and neglect as predictors of violent criminal behavior, researchers investigated the connection between childhood maltreatment and later arrest for alcohol and drug-related offenses. The study found that childhood maltreatment is a significant predictor of adult arrests for alcohol and/or drug-related offenses. Contrary to expectations, however, juvenile arrests for these offenses were not significantly related to early victimization.

Identification of study and control cohorts. The early childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect cases included in this study were brought to the attention of authorities and validated by the court: either they were processed in the county juvenile court of a metropolitan area in the Midwest or drawn from adult criminal court cases where the victim was age 11 or younger. Seventy-two percent of the children who were abused or neglected as preschoolers were matched with controls on the basis of gender, race, date of birth (± 1 week), and hospital of birth through the use of county birth record information. For children abused or neglected when they were of school age, elementary school records for the same time period were used to find matches of the same gender, race, date of birth (± 6 months), and same class in elementary school during the period under study (1967 through 1971); matches were found for 74 percent of the study group.

Definitions of terms. Within the context of this study, *physical abuse* referred to injuries such as bruises/welts, abrasions/lacerations, wounds/cuts, bone/skull fractures, and other evidence of physical injury to the child. *Sexual abuse* referred to a variety of charges, ranging from relatively nonspecific charges of "assault and battery with intent to gratify sexual desires," to more specific and detailed charges of "fondling/touching in an obscene manner," sodomy, incest, etc. *Neglect* referred to cases in which the court found extreme failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention to the child.

Study results

Risk for juvenile arrest. After controlling for age, gender, and race, child maltreatment was found to be a significant predictor of delinquency. Being abused and/or neglected increased the odds of being arrested as a juvenile. However, the relationship between childhood victimization and juvenile arrests for alcohol and/or drugs was not significant. Only one variable—gender—influenced the juvenile arrest rate for alcohol or drugs: males were more than 10 times as likely as females to be arrested for this offense prior to age 18.

Risk for arrest in young adulthood. After controlling for demographic characteristics and juvenile contact with the criminal justice system, childhood abuse and/or neglect was found to be a statistically significant predictor of having at least one alcohol- or drug-related arrest in adulthood. The odds of being arrested for at least one such offense were 39 percent greater for maltreated children than for control subjects. An indirect "path" between childhood victimization and adult substance

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abuse arrest was also demonstrated, i.e., maltreated children were more likely to have an arrest as a juvenile, and those who were arrested as juveniles were at greater risk for arrest for alcohol or drug offenses as adults.

Finally, there appeared to be a link between gender and arrest for alcohol or drug abuse in adulthood. Males were significantly more likely to be arrested for substance abuse than females, regardless of whether or not they had a history of childhood abuse or neglect. Interestingly, race was a strong predictor of juvenile arrest but had no direct impact on adult arrests for alcohol or drugs.

Gender and race patterns. Given well-established gender and race differences in official arrest data, separate analyses by gender and race were conducted. Two patterns emerged:

- Abused and/or neglected females were significantly more likely to have alcohol or drug arrests in adulthood than control females, but no differences were found between the male groups.
- Being abused and/or neglected increased the probability of arrest for alcohol or drugs in adulthood for whites, but it was not a significant predictor of adult arrest for these offenses for blacks.

Issues and implications

Although childhood victimization was associated with an increased risk of arrest as a juvenile, in contrast to much previous research, no increased risk of arrest was found for juvenile alcohol or drug arrests. One possible explanation for this discrepant finding may be the fact that this study used official arrest data, rather than self-reports, to determine relationships. Another possibility is that previous research focused on institutionalized youths who may have been qualitatively different from the sample of young adults investigated in this study. Also, this study speculated that the relationship between childhood maltreatment may be more complex than previously hypothesized.

More research is needed to further analyze the relationships between childhood maltreatment and later alcohol or drug abuse, but intervention efforts should recognize that childhood victims, especially females, may be at increased risk of developing alcohol and drug problems as they mature. Victims of childhood maltreatment may require different treatment approaches. There is also a need for careful screening at intake in alcohol or substance abuse treatment programs, including those aimed at juveniles, and for staff training.

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